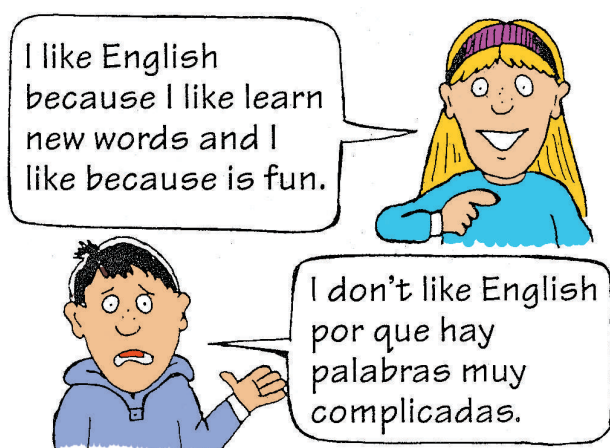


# Children's Attitudes to Learning English

Jayne Moon

Children do not come to their English lessons like blank sheets of paper. They already have views about and attitudes towards learning English as the two quotes above show. These attitudes are formed by the social environment in which they grow up and by the people around them. Teachers are probably one of the most important influences on the attitudes of children. So it is really important for us to be aware of our children's attitudes so that we can maintain positive attitudes and try to change negative attitudes.



## 1. Why are attitudes so important?

Children's attitudes to foreign languages are in the process of being formed in childhood and are not yet fixed. So many educators believe that this is a good time to try and influence them positively. Some children who start learning a foreign language like English at 8 or 9 or earlier will continue to study English in secondary school and afterwards. That is a very long period of time to maintain motivation. If children can develop positive attitudes at the early stages, this provides a good basis for sustaining their interest in and motivation to continue learning English for the longer term. Another reason for their importance is that negative attitudes can affect children's access to language input and can affect their ability to benefit from instruction. Adam, a Hungarian boy learning English told his teacher that he did not like English very much. He explained that he did not like speaking. As a result of his feelings about spoken English, he wouldn't speak very much English in class and that limited his opportunities for language practice and so he did not improve. His problems with speaking also affected his general attitudes to English. From a teacher's perspective, attitudes are important because children with positive attitudes are much easier and more enjoyable to teach than those with negative attitudes. Children

with negative attitudes can be disruptive in class and influence or disturb other children. For example, Adam was quite rebellious and often refused to take part in activities with others. He also influenced some of his peers.

## 2. How are attitudes formed and can they be changed?

If we look at the reasons children give for liking or not liking English, we can get some idea about the things which influence children's attitudes to English. The comments below are from a group of Spanish 6-7 year olds:

- ✓ I like it and it is fun
  - ✓ I play in English and I learn a lot
  - ✓ Es muy 'chuli' (it is cool!)
  - ✓ It depends on the teacher
  - ✓ I'm with my friends
  - ✓ It is interesting
  - ✓ I like to speak in English and my mother likes it
  - ✓ I like how it sounds but sometimes it is a 'pain'
- (Translated responses of Spanish children aged 7-8)

Some of the main influences on younger children's attitudes are:

- teacher (*it depends on the teacher*)
- friends/peer group (*I'm with my friends, it is cool to learn English i.e. socially acceptable*)
- parents (*my mother likes it*)
- teaching method (*it is fun*)
- the language itself (*I like how it sounds*)

As children get older, their attitudes are increasingly influenced by their peers, youth culture and a growing realization that English may be useful to them in society. E.g. '*I can understand computers and game instructions*' '*I want to go to England*'. But one of the positive things for teachers is that 'teachers' and 'teaching methods' remain a strong influence on children's attitudes even after they become teenagers.

Attitudes do not remain fixed. We can help to change pupils' attitudes through our own attitudes to English and, our enthusiasm for teaching. We can do it by creating a positive learning environment and stimulating their interest. Attitudes can also be influenced by the learning process itself and by its outcomes. So if pupils enjoy their English classes and gain some success, this may in turn develop positive attitudes and increase motivation.

### 3. How can we develop positive attitudes?

Developing positive attitudes in your pupils is not just a matter of doing lots of games and fun activities or being popular. A teacher that I know was very surprised when she discovered that some of her favourite class did not like English. Pupils liked her very much, but that is not the same as liking English. But if children like you, that is a very good basis to start from.

#### Create good relations with your pupils

Show interest in pupils by listening carefully to what they say and responding to their efforts. Find out about them as individuals e.g. about their families, about their interests. Begin the day with some personal conversation so you show you are interested in them. Be firm but fair. If you allow children to do what they like, it will not make you more popular. Children respect firmness.

#### Expect the Best from Pupils

Keep an open mind about pupils and try not to be influenced by comments from other teachers or grades/marks which pupils received in other classes. If you approach pupils with an open mind and expect the best from them, this will help to raise their expectations of themselves. These raised expectations may then encourage children to make more effort. This effort in turn may lead to improved performance and increased positive regard from you and other adults.

#### Create Opportunities for Success

Adapt activities to suit the level of your pupils so that you give each pupil a chance of being successful at his or her level. Pair pupils so that a stronger pupil works with a weaker pupil. Vary activities in each lesson so that you include some, which all pupils can do successfully. Give weaker or slower pupils responsibilities in class to boost their confidence e.g. as class monitor.

#### Build on Children's Natural Interest in Language

Children seem to have a natural interest in and get enjoyment from the sounds of the new language. Build on this interest through using jazz chants, rhymes and songs which contain a strong rhythm or a play on language e.g. *Mrs Hairy Bear says. 'I can hear robbers'! Hairy Bear: I don't care, I don't care. I'll fim fam fight em'*. Children often spontaneously start playing with sounds. Encourage this and make use of it in rhymes or poems to develop children's intrinsic interest in language

#### Help Children Create their own Reasons for Learning English.

In the long term, you want pupils to be able to create their own reasons or goals for learning English. In the beginning help them to find purposes for their learning e.g. *Carlos, you went to*

*England at Easter. Now you want to keep in touch with your friend via email. So maybe this activity will help you to write. Maybe you can develop a link with a school in another country like Randi Flemmen in Norway. Her children made a video about themselves and sent it to a school in America. They learned a lot of English in making the video and its production created a real reason for using English.*

#### Find Out about Children's Attitudes

Find out about children's attitudes to English. You may be surprised by what you learn! Discuss children's feelings informally. Encourage them to talk about why they like or dislike English. Or use a \*questionnaire like the 'Poo Bear' example below which was used to find out about English children's attitudes to learning French. Find out how they like to work e.g. in pairs, groups. Find out what their interests are. But use the information by making changes in your lessons so children know you really are listening to them and are interested in their views.

Name.....  
.....

Please put a tick next to the sentences which apply to you or that you agree with.

1. I don't like French very much.
2. French may be useful to me later. ✓
3. I like French. ✓
4. French is a waste of time.
5. French lessons are fun.
6. French is hard. ✓
7. I have been to France.
8. I would like to go to France. ✓
9. I'm no good at French. ✓
10. I would like to find out more about France.
11. I would like to learn other languages. ✓
12. I think my parents are pleased that I'm learning French. ✓
13. I think everyone should learn French at Primary School. ✓
14. My friends think that learning French is good. ✓
15. I don't like the way we learn French.
16. I think that doing French now will help me in Secondary School. ✓
17. I would like to meet some French children my age. ✓
18. I've been to France and would like to go again.
19. I don't like the French teacher.
20. French is usually boring.
21. I'm glad I'm learning French. ✓
22. I would not like to visit France.

(\*) Designed by Ann Gregory

If you were not sure about any of the questions, put those numbers here \_\_\_\_\_

If you want to explain anything else, please write here, or tell me \_\_\_\_\_